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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000827

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SUBJECT: MGLE01: STATUS OF NATIONAL DIALOGUE -- SIDE
CONSULTATIONS CONTINUE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Following the March 14 evening session, Speaker Nabih Berri announced a break in the national dialogue conference until March 22. This development was somewhat unexpected, considering that Druse leader Walid Jumblatt had just returned to Beirut two days earlier to rejoin the talks, but various participants informed the Embassy that the conferees were at an impasse over the presidency and Hizballah's arms. Sources tell us that agreements concerning Lebanese/Syrian relations, the international tribunal, and Palestinian arms have been reached, but the conference participants agreed to break for consultations, before making one last push for consensus on the big issues of Lahoud and Hizballah's arms. Most of the political figures are voicing cautious optimism in both public and private statements about the possibility of reaching a comprehensive accord. Outside political analysts, with various degrees of access to the talks, are more pessimistic and are resigning themselves to another year and half of Lahoud and an increase of Hizballah's influence in the Siniora government. Several have commented that perhaps the most important achievement of the dialogue is the lowering of tensions between the Sunni and Shia communities. End summary.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS THUS FAR

¶2. (C) The 14 participants of the national dialogue ended the second phase of the talks with a limited number of agreements, but in a spirit of communal cooperation that did not previously exist. The sponsor of the dialogue, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, announced that consensus agreements had been reached calling for: the disarmament of Palestinian militias located outside the refugee camps within six months, normalized diplomatic relations with Syria, comprehensive support for the UNIIIC and the establishment of an international tribunal, and an appeal to the United Nations to validate Lebanon's claim to the Sheba'a Farms region along the Blue Line. There was also a unanimous decision to "monitor and control" Palestinian arms inside the refugee camps, but specifics were not provided.

¶3. (C) As would be expected, "rejectionist" Palestinian groups did not welcome the announcement concerning Palestinian arms. A spokesperson for Syrian-sponsored PFLP-GC, Anwar Raja, said his organization was "surprised" by the action and complained that the various Palestinian groups had not been consulted in advance of the conference. Independent political analyst Jawad Adra, however, said the rejectionist groups were on thin ice in Lebanon and did not

have many allies. He noted that even PLO leader Mahmoud Abbas had earlier assured the Lebanese government that Palestinians understand they were "guests" in the country and had to abide by the laws of Lebanon. Adra commented that no one in the March 14 coalition cares for the Palestinian militias, as they are regarded as a vestige of Syria's occupation. In his view, even Hizballah would not mind seeing them removed from the political scene, because it would reaffirm their monopoly as the country's true "resistance," comprising only Lebanese citizens.

RELATIONS WITH SYRIA

¶4. (C) Concerning the dialogue's agreement to attempt to normalize diplomatic relations with Syria, Independent Shia MP Yassine Jaber told poloff that the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon had played an important role in ensuring the proposal would not be rejected out-of-hand by Syria. Jaber believes that this agreement, and the overall effect of reducing Sunni-Shia tensions in Lebanon, were the most important achievements of the dialogue. He said the call for normal bilateral relations effectively puts the Syrian regime in a difficult corner -- that is, in his view they must respond constructively and in a timely fashion. Jaber maintained that with the UN Security Council closely monitoring Syria's cooperation with the UNIIC, the Asad regime could ill afford intransigence and bad faith toward Lebanon's proposal. He commented, "Although most observers don't recognize the connection, Berri has shrewdly introduced a difficult issue at the most opportune time for Lebanon -- when Syria is trying to act like a responsible member of the international community."

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¶5. (C) Probably the easiest issue for consensus was the agreement to fully support UNIIC in its investigations, as well as the early establishment of the international tribunal. Even though GOL support for the tribunal was ostensibly the reason five Shia ministers withdrew from the Siniora cabinet on December 12 and paralyzed the government for seven weeks, several factors have contributed to making the issue more acceptable to the March 8 forces. First, the issue was decided within the national dialogue framework; second, the issue enjoys broad popular support among the Lebanese public; and finally, the investigative process of the new chief investigator, Serge Brammertz, is viewed more favorably than that of his predecessor. There is a substantial risk for Hizballah due to questions of its possible involvement in some of the acts of political violence committed since October 2004, but it would have been difficult for Nasrallah to go against the other 13 participants on this issue.

¶6. (C) To neutral observers, the agreement to make a sovereignty claim on the territory of the Sheba'a Farms is the issue most intertwined with Syria. Although Berri made light of the complications in his March 14 news conference, political analyst Jawad Adra believes this territorial claim gives the Syrian regime considerable leverage in the Hizballah disarmament issue. Adra said in his opinion, the Asad regime will never actually cede "one inch" of traditional Syrian territory, no matter what they may say in public. Adra is certain the Syrians will keep this matter in limbo as long as possible -- with the resulting ambiguity providing adequate political cover for Hizballah. The independent Sunni analyst did not understand why the March 14 participants gave such an important concession to Nasrallah without receiving a commitment to change the presidency in return. He ventured that there may still be a quid pro quo to be delivered, but Adra was mystified by the timing of Berri's pronouncement on this issue.

STATUS OF THE PRESIDENCY

¶7. (C) The status of President Lahoud, although much discussed in the ten dialogue sessions held thus far, remains unresolved. At the start of the conference, Saad Hariri insisted it was far and away the most critical order of business, but a wide gulf persists between the March 14 and March 8 forces, with Michel Aoun complicating the process. There are reports that Aoun's representatives are cautiously discussing possible alternatives with Samir Ja'ja', Saad Hariri, and Amin Gemayel. On March 10, Aounist MP Ibrahim Kanaan advised poloff that Michel Aoun was "not absolutely against" a non-Aoun presidency, but it was essential to know the composition and policy guidelines of any post-Lahoud government. MP Yassine Jaber told poloff on March 16 that side-bar conversations were taking place among several participants that may break the stalemate. Jawad Adra, on the other hand, said on March 15 that to think Michel Aoun would accept anyone else as president was naivete of the highest order. From discussions with his sources, Adra was certain the presidency issue was now nearly off the table due to the agreement to claim Lebanese sovereignty over Sheba'a Farms, and that Lahoud would finish out his extended term.

¶8. (C) Concerning the disarmament of Hizballah, independent Shia MP Yassine Jaber told us that although the idea was gaining currency in Lebanon's public domain, Nasrallah will be strong enough to have it referred to a post-dialogue "working group" and, in effect, diffuse the issue's momentum.

Jaber said Nasrallah's offer to discuss Lebanon's defense plan -- which most participants interpreted as an offer to study the gradual replacement of Hizballah by LAF forces -- was in reality an elegant maneuver to deflect growing pressure and gain an almost limitless amount of time.

GETTING OFF THE RIDE

¶9. (C) MP Jaber said it was amusing to watch Nabih Berri at his news conference. He felt that Berri wanted nothing better than to declare victory and close down the conference.

But Jaber felt the Speaker was now the victim of his own success, and was on a ride he did not know how to stop. Jaber predicted the national dialogue would hold a few meetings next week (starting on March 22 since PM Siniora is traveling on March 20/21) and then recess until after the Arab Summit scheduled for March 28 in Khartoum. In his opinion, this would give Saudi Arabia a final opportunity to

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broker a Lahoud deal with the Syrian regime, but he also said he wouldn't hold his breath. Despite the likely less-than-ideal results, Jaber felt that the national dialogue would be considered an important achievement in that it re-established national comity at a time when inter-communal tensions were reaching a dangerous level. He was also confident that the experience of sitting across from each other and hearing first-hand each others' positions unfiltered by their supporters would encourage each participant to continue with dialogue rather than confrontation.

MURRAY